

BOOK REVIEW: GEOPOLITICS

When Empires Collide:
China vs America

ZIHAD AZAD

"It was the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta that made the war inevitable," Thucydides wrote in *The History of the Peloponnesian War*. Building on this historic context, American political scientist Graham Allison hypothesised the "Thucydides' Trap"—whenever the world's premier rising superpower bumps against the world's pre-existing superpower, ruinous war is almost certain. Much like the Romans could not avoid it against the Persians, nor the British against the Germans, it seems the geopolitical contest between US and China has also become unavoidable.

In *Has China Won? : The Chinese Challenge to American Primacy* (PublicAffairs, 2020), Kishore Mahbubani prognosticates about the near future as much as he emphasises the recent past in USA and China's geopolitical battle.

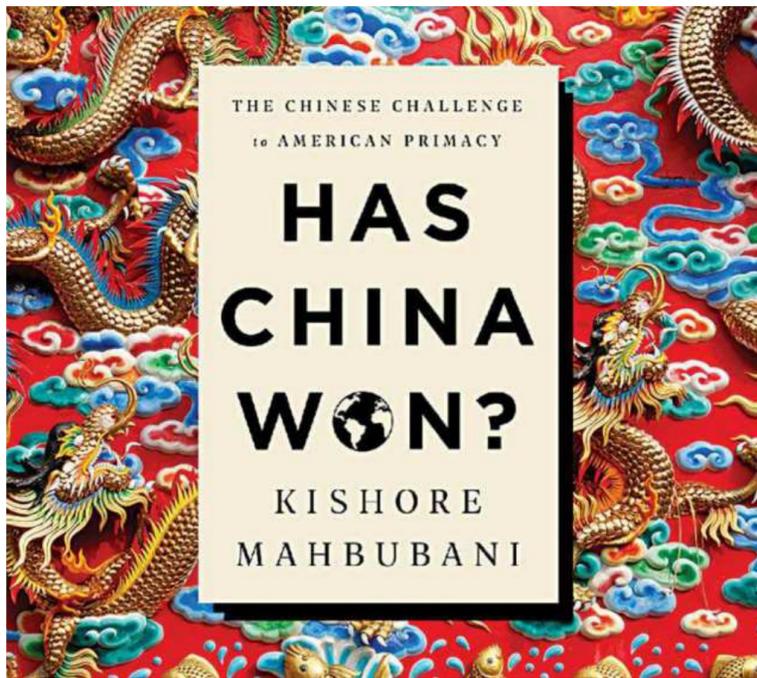
A career diplomat-turned-academic who represented Singapore in the UN, Mahbubani takes recourse to the Modernization Theory, which prophesies that as a developing nation's middle-class surges, they will demand more political rights until democratic reforms become inevitable. Hence, as China lifted more than 800 million people above the extreme poverty line over the past 40 years—creating the world's largest middle income population in the process—American policymakers complacently waited for the revolution to overthrow the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Well, nothing of the sort transpired. Now Western sinologists are scratching their heads over why reality isn't conforming to the textbook.

Mahbubani resolves the dilemma with his deep insight into the Chinese psyche, "Chinese culture values social harmony over individual empowerment. American culture is the opposite."

Indeed, over the 2,500 year history of the united China, it has mostly been ruled by a centralised authoritarian bureaucracy punctuated by a few brief inter-dynastic exceptions. Mahbubani therefore warns the West to exercise caution in their wish for a "Democratic China". Sure, it can embroil China in political and civil unrest; but it can also usher in a populist Trumpian figure who might start asking for reparations from Britain for the ignominious opium wars, attack Japan as a retribution for the Nanjing massacre, or start messing with exchange rates that would spell disaster for the average American or European consumer.

While America was busy getting mired in disastrous wars in the Middle East, China, unbeknownst to the world, overtook the US economy in a key figure of merit: purchasing power parity. And now it looks set to overtake USA in nominal GDP terms by 2025. How to deal with this new 'middle kingdom'?

This is where the book becomes engaging. US Army General H R McMaster expresses the American attitude succinctly, "At the end of the day, the struggle between America and China



DESIGN: SARAH ANJUM BARI

represents the struggle between 'free and open societies and closed authoritarian systems.'" Except this time, as Mahbubani convincingly contends, the choice is not that straightforward. Burgeoning student debt, housing crisis, an ongoing opioid epidemic, a poor healthcare system, crumbling infrastructure—these are all telltale signs of an empire in decline. And while self-correction is baked into democratic institutions, they do not have the leeway to make major U-turns in a short timeframe.

But China does. This unchecked executive power has drawbacks—the disastrous "one child" policy comes to mind—but it also means going from zero kilometers of 6-lane expressways to 150,000 kilometers in under 10 years. Furthermore, unlike the old and corrupt Soviet communist party, the CCP has devised an ingenious filtering mechanism which results in the best and the brightest minds running the country. So this time, China has assumed the role of America—flexible, supple, and forward-thinking, while America acts increasingly like the Soviets—arrogant, myopic, and unbending. The role reversal is uniquely ironic.

Unfortunately, at the end of the day, Mahbubani is a diplomat, unwilling to ruffle too many feathers. Instead of carefully examining American war economics and how it holds US foreign policy hostage, he politely accepts the

narrative that US invades the Islamic world in order to liberate and modernise the oppressed.

In a similar fashion, he sidesteps any meaningful deliberation on the Uighur humanitarian crisis by claiming that any Chinese leader who shows weakness towards the Xinjiang separatist movement would lose his legitimacy to rule. Mahbubani does this with an ease befitting a man who has been in rooms full of war criminals way too many times (incidentally, he often recounts with nostalgia his meetings with Henry Kissinger).

Has China Won ends on a positive note, I suspect because it has to. From combating climate change to realising UN developmental goals, the two largest economies of the world have no other recourse but to cooperate, the author reminds us. But he overlooks one key aspect of the American psyche: its deep-seated belief in "American Exceptionalism". Americans truly view the world through a binary prism in which they are the "good" guys and those who go against them are invariably "bad".

What happens if they decide to channel this supreme righteousness against China?

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FROM PAGES TO PIXELS

In Search of A Suitable Adaptation

SUSHMITA S PREETHA

I've long come to accept that there's no such thing as a suitable adaption of a favourite book. Yet, when it was announced that Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* (1993), a novel I have loved through the decades, was going to be adapted by the BBC for a miniseries—and directed by Mira Nair, no less—I couldn't help but feel hopeful about the possibilities. Could this really be... the one?

A Suitable Boy is centred on the search of an eligible groom for the spirited student of English Literature, Lata Mehra, coming of age in North India in 1951. But it's also the story of a newly independent nation coming to terms with its own identity—a story about communalism, feudalism, land reform, the first Indian general elections and women's position in Indian society—told through the lives and perspectives of four entwined families: the Mehras, Kapoors, Chatterjees, and Khans. Despite being one of the longest books ever to be published in a single volume in English, it is a surprisingly easy read, lucid and engaging in equal measure. What makes the novel a success is the brilliance and playfulness with which Seth weaves layers of stories, depicting the ordinary even in the midst of dramatic familial and political upheaval.

The adaption, alas, reduces it to an almost exoticised story about India, with its monkeys, courtesans, arranged marriages and Hindu-Muslim conflict. The satiric elements evident in the novel are all but lost in the forced attempt(s) to make a larger political point. Perhaps such a fate is inevitable when a 1,488 page novel is stripped to its highlights—the novel is to the adaption what a test match is to a T20—but it's nevertheless disappointing given the extraordinary success of some recent book-to-series adaptions in retaining, even intensifying, the complexity of the text. Why could this not be a longer series, stretched over multiple seasons, so that the characters and story lines could be properly fleshed out?

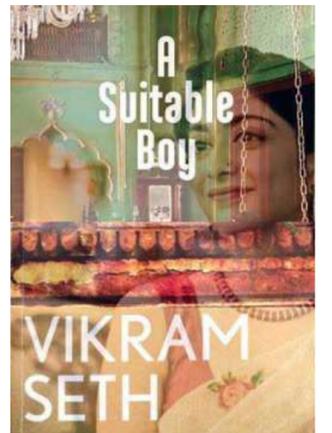
While some characters, such as Maan Kapoor and Saeeda Bai, shine in their roles—which has perhaps more to do with the actors rather than the screenplay—many others who make the book memorable fall flat.

Lata herself is borderline annoying, with her wide-eyed smile that overpowers every scene and robs the character of its depth. The witty and whimsical Chatterjees—"an intelligent family where everyone thought of everyone else as an idiot"—are reduced

to just idiots, and Amit Chatterjee (I was team Amit all the way) to a barely believable contender for Lata's hand in marriage. Many important characters are reduced to mere sidekicks (Praan and Savita, for instance), while others, such as Meenakshi and her lover, are given unnecessary screen time to add some sizzle and spice.

In the novel the dialogues are a revelation—poetic, satiric, always sharp and convincing, but in the series they seem to acquire a saccharine, exaggerated quality. While it makes sense for some of the characters in newly independent India, such as the Chatterjees, to chatter away in British accents, it is beyond any comprehension why Maan does not speak to his Urdu teacher in Urdu or why two villagers are conversing in English. The occasional sprinkling of Urdu/Hindi dialogues (Tabu is magnificent in any language but in Urdu she is to die for) made me wish that the makers had not taken the safe route of setting the show in English simply because it had been adapted from an English novel and/or is catering to an international audience.

Some parts of the series are enjoyable, no doubt. While the cinematography is beautiful and Nair's ability to bring



DESIGN: SARAH ANJUM BARI

to life the colours, the calmness and the chaos of post-independent India, noteworthy, I, for one, could have lived without the SparkNotes version of this literary masterpiece. I better go brush the dust off my copy of the novel.

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INTERVIEW



Tahmima Anam, author



Filiz Ozcan, co-artistic director, Komola Collective



Leesa Gazi, actor and co-founder, Komola Collective

ON STORIES OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Tahmima Anam's play *Shahrazad*, written for UK-based arts organisation Komola Collective and live streamed on October 29, 2020, adopts the epic of *1001 Nights* to explore the lives of survivors of domestic violence. We spoke to author Tahmima Anam, director Filiz Ozcan, and actor/co-founder Leesa Gazi about putting a play together virtually, and the ethics of dramatising domestic violence in fiction.

Read the interview online on The Daily Star website, on fb.com/DailyStarBooks and @thedailystarbooks on Instagram.

THE BOOK REPORT

Wreetu's Comic Book on Menstrual Health

MRITTIKA ANAN RAHMAN

In 2016, while already involved in conducting school-wide workshops on the topic, Sharmin Kabir began to think of ways in which adolescents could be taught about menstrual health in a friendly manner. "What would the children be left with once the workshop was over and Sharmin and her team had left?" she wondered.

So she began building her own resource. The end result? A resourceful and enjoyable guide that children can consult for everything from mood swings to getting their periods.

"I was inspired by *Meena* and the way it used cartoons to teach children crucial information. So I decided to develop our resources in a comic book format," says Kabir, founder of Wreetu, a platform that works to improve the experience of menstruating women.

The comic book centres on a group of cousins who go to their grandmother's house in their village during the summer holidays. The girls are excited to see their relatives, but it soon becomes apparent that one of them is entering puberty but isn't aware of it. Their aunt, who is a medical student, teaches them about their bodies, menstruation, and about growing up.

"We chose the rural setting because I think all of us can relate, even if a little bit, to the nature and surroundings of a village. I also based the kids in the story on my own nieces. The character of the aunt was based on my own sister," Kabir shares.

The fictional narrative works to warmly invite readers into the familiar setting of a family home, where older cousins pass on their wisdom and cousins growing up together



PHOTO: WREETU.COM

bond over their shared experiences. It creates a comfortable environment for children to tackle otherwise uncomfortable topics.

"I always believe in including everyone in the conversation," Kabir shares. "Even when we conducted workshops in schools, we made sure to include the boys and if possible the parents too. So for the book, I asked the children in all the workshops what they wanted to see and what they needed to learn. And we simply developed that. So in a way, these kids created the books, I was just the medium."

The book starts by talking about physical and emotional changes during puberty, why

and how menstruation happens, and how the female reproductive organ functions. It offers instructions on how to use sanitary napkins, exercises that one can do to relieve period pain, proper dietary choices for periods, and how one can keep track of their cycle, all in a way that speaks to fifth to eighth graders—the main target demographic for the book.

"I consulted with a gynaecologist to get all the medical facts right and showed it to more doctors to fact check," Kabir clarifies. Another concern was designing the content so as not to offend conservative families. "So we were extra cautious in the way we approached the topics and diagrams."

"Raising funds to print and distribute the books for free was a bigger challenge but EMK Center gave us a grant. The first and so far only edition was published in March 2019. We distributed it to 20 schools. Later, more schools contacted us and sourced the book for their students."

Most recently in October, 45 copies were distributed among adolescent girls in Nimok Pura village of Kishoreganj.

The glossy and colourful pages of the comic book look entertaining and inviting—it reads like any other children's book. Yet it passes on valuable information to an age demographic that desperately needs it. Copies of *Wreetu Comic Book* can be ordered through Wreetu's Facebook page, for BDT 250.

Mrittika Anan Rahman is sub-editor, Shout, and a contributor to DS Books.